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Teaching for Understanding: Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage

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This paper briefly considers what research has told us about the development of young children's understanding. It goes on to look at the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) in terms of that research. The paper suggests that the guidance has addressed concerns that early years practitioners might be delivering an inappropriate curriculum in their attempts to reach targets. The published guidance is giving a clear message that an early years curriculum is quite different from that provided for older children and that our knowledge of child development should be the driving force in delivering that curriculum.

Introduction

September 2000 saw the introduction of a foundation stage for children aged three to the end of reception year. To support this foundation stage QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) has developed accompanying curriculum guidance (*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000)). For the first time in this country, pre-school and reception year children have been provided with their own curriculum that purports to be relevant to their needs. For teachers of pre-school children a common curriculum is provided regardless of the educational setting. For teachers of reception year children there is now a recognition that all children in that year group need a discrete curriculum and it removes the previous confusion that arose from the requirement that a child should follow the National Curriculum from his/her 5th birthday. The foundation curriculum is designed to help early years practitioners plan towards the *Early Learning Goals* (October, 1999). These replaced the *Desirable Outcomes For Children's Learning* (SCAA, 1996). These Early Learning Goals describe expectations deemed to be achievable for most children by the end of the foundation stage. In this way they are equivalent to the attainment targets of the National Curriculum.

There has been some concern (e.g. Edwards & Knight, 1994) that the curriculum offered to young children has been a diluted version of the National Curriculum and that teachers have been finding it difficult 'to sustain the well-established principles of early childhood education in their practice' (Early Years Curriculum Group, 1998). The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* is providing the opportunity for practitioners to build on their knowledge of child development and provide a curriculum that is more appropriate to the needs of young children.

Children, aged three, four and five are constantly encountering new experiences and seeking to understand them in order to extend their skills, develop their confidence and build on what they already know. They learn in many different ways. Practitioners have a crucial role in this learning and

should draw on a range of teaching and care strategies and knowledge of child development. (QCA, 2000: 6)

This paper will consider the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* in terms of how it addresses the issue of young children's understanding.

What is Understanding in the Early Years?

Newton (2000: 191) described understanding as being about 'getting a handle on things', about being able to make connections between facts and ideas, and being able to see relationships and patterns. He was describing the importance of children's understanding in the context of primary science, but it is equally important in all areas of the curriculum and to all children, whatever their age. Understanding, as opposed to memorisation, is essential if children are to make sense of their world, if they are to learn by connecting new information to what they already know, if they are to remember what they have learned and if they are to solve problems (Newton, 2000: 192).

Teachers' knowledge of children's understanding is informed by different theories of cognitive development. Piagetian theory has been very influential in describing the stages of thinking that children go through and the recognition that children actively construct their own learning through their interactions with the environment. This has led to teaching approaches that recognise the importance of young children being directly involved in their learning and the necessity of providing them with concrete experiences and opportunities to discover things for themselves (Davis, 1991). This is in contrast to a more traditional teaching approach in which children are seen as being passive recipients of information. The Piagetian constructivist theory is limited, however, in that although it recognises the importance of social and cultural factors these are secondary to the idea of developmental stages.

In Piagetian theory, learning is predominantly individually centred, and development leads learning. Stages of development are both sequential and hierarchical and children cannot progress from one to another until a state of consolidation and readiness has been achieved. (Wood & Bennett, 1999)

Boulton-Lewis (1995) pointed out the dangers of teachers waiting until a child had reached the appropriate stage before introducing certain concepts, giving support to this idea of 'readiness' described above. In accepting Piagetian theory the role of the teacher is very much that of a facilitator and supporter.

Another important player in teachers' knowledge of how children learn and understand is Vygotsky whose theories have given rise to a social-constructivist framework. Children's learning and understanding are seen to be more dependent on experience than on developmental stages. Changes in a child's understanding come about, according to Vygotsky, through moving from an initial level of understanding which is rather vague to a level where the learner attempts to make sense of new knowledge, connecting it with prior knowledge. Those with greater knowledge and understanding have a key role to play in guiding the child from one level of understanding to another through what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The influence of

social-constructivist theory has led to a greater emphasis on teacher support through modelling and scaffolding (Lewis & Wray, 1995; the National Literacy Strategy, 1998; Waterland, 1985).

The importance of play in developing the young child's understanding has also been well documented (e.g. David, 1999) and is very much part of what early years practitioners know about child development. Whitebread (2000: 151–154) discusses Bruner's argument that play is essential to the development of children's intellectual ability.

Play, in Bruner's view, is all about developing flexibility of thought. It provides opportunities to try out possibilities, to put different elements of a situation together in various ways, to look at problems from different viewpoints. (Whitebread, 2000: 152)

Teachers' knowledge of children's understanding has been influenced by the dominant theories described. From this knowledge notions of good early years' practice have arisen. The Early Years Curriculum Group (1998) took from research evidence the key factors in effective early years education. These included the importance of rooting children's early education in their prior knowledge and experience, the need for active and social involvement, the importance of partnership between teacher and learner and the necessary opportunities being provided for children to take responsibility for their actions (Early Years Curriculum Group, 1998: 2).

In terms of pedagogy these points were translated into opportunities that had to be provided in an early years' curriculum if children were to understand and learn. These were:

- active learning
- interactive learning
- decision making
- reflecting
- representing

(Early Years Curriculum Group, 1998: 2)

Does the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) set out to meet these requirements? Certainly it acknowledges the importance of:

Knowledge and understanding of the world: with opportunities for all children to solve problems, make decisions, experiment, predict, plan and question in a variety of contexts, and to explore and find out about their environment and people and places that have significance in their lives. (QCA, 2000: 9)

How the guidance sets about the task of translating these requirements into curricular guidance will be considered in the next section.

Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage: A General Overview

First of all it would be appropriate to look in general terms at the organisation and the content of the guidance before going on to analyse some of the suggested

practical recommendations, using the points identified by the Early Years Curriculum Group (see previous section) as a framework. The guidance is divided into four sections, the two main sections address first of all the principles and supporting practice for effective early years education and then the areas of learning and early learning goals. Within the principles outlined can be found elements that relate to learning theory previously discussed in terms of children's understanding. Examples of these include:

Early years experience should build on what children already know and can do and ... an early years curriculum should (include) provision for the different starting points from which children develop their learning, building on what they can already do (and) relevant and appropriate content that matches the different levels of young children's needs. (QCA. 2000: 11)

Having outlined the principles for effective practice in early years settings the document provides supporting descriptions of what these principles mean and practical examples of how the principles can be turned into good practice. One example describes how, building on a child's experience of being in hospital, a teacher of a pre-school group of children set up a 'hospital' and in consultation with the children decided that the hospital needed a reception area with a telephone, an appointment book, pencils and a notepad. The children took on the roles of receptionist, doctors and nurses. In their different roles they began to 'write', scribbling and making approximations of letters and numbers (QCA 2000: 15). In this way the children's writing would develop but important social skills would also be fostered.

In this same section (QCA 2000: 20–24) effective learning and teaching are described and clearly explained.

Learning for young children is a rewarding and enjoyable experience in which they explore, investigate, discover, create, practise, rehearse, repeat, revise and consolidate their developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes. During the foundation stage, many of these aspects of learning are brought together effectively through playing and talking. (QCA 2000: 20)

Teaching means systematically helping children to learn so that they are helped to make connections in their learning and are actively led forward, as well as helped to reflect on what they have already learned. (QCA 2000: 22)

Again this section gives clear practical examples of how the theory can be translated into good practice, each example easily recognised by early years practitioners as ways in which children can be assisted in their understanding.

The other main section addresses the areas of learning and early learning goals. The guidance is providing a curriculum that supports the attainment of *Early Learning Goals* (QCA, 1999). These goals are organised into six areas of learning that are almost identical to the earlier *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning* (SCAA, 1996). The areas are: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development. The supporting curriculum guidance is quick to point out that the

areas are defined in order to assist practitioners with the planning of experiences and activities and not to suggest that children's understanding can be divided into discrete areas. Edwards and Knight (1994) discuss the concern of early years practitioners that a Key Stage 2 subject based curriculum is being inflicted on children at Key Stage 1 and even at pre-school stage, forcing teachers to introduce a traditional curriculum too early. Interestingly, Edwards and Knight do not dismiss out of hand the use of subjects for teachers' thinking about the curriculum.

At some point, beginning practitioners will need to arrive at understandings of the structure of the material of the early years curriculum. We suggest that this is best done through analyses of the nature of subjects. Subjects are an accepted way of describing the knowledge that is important within our culture. (Edwards & Knight, 1994: 53)

They argue that the problem does not lie with the subjects themselves but with the traditional teaching of the subjects. It is important that the subjects are not taught in an abstract way but at the same time the framework of subjects can help 'both practitioners and learners to identify and use the discourses and understandings that they contain' (Edwards & Knight 1994: 53). This is very much in keeping with the stated position of the foundation stage curriculum guidance.

The guidance takes each area and identifies 'stepping stones' of progress towards the early learning goals. The knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes are described that children will need to achieve the goals. The stepping stones are supported by practical examples of what children may typically do at the various stages and what the practitioner needs to do. Again, QCA make quite explicit the fact that although the stepping stones are presented in an hierarchical order it should not be expected that all children will conform to the sequence. Very much in keeping with a social-constructivist theory of children's understanding, building on children's prior knowledge is seen as being very important.

As children move from one stepping stone to another, they take with them what they have already learned and continue to practise, refine and use their previous learning, so that learning becomes consolidated. (QCA, 2000: 27)

For example, in the section on Knowledge and understanding of the world, a child's description of a family wedding is followed up with the suggestion that this would be a good opportunity to explain the significance of special events, a stepping stone on the way to the early learning goal of children beginning to *know about their own cultures and beliefs and those of other people*.

The value of play and active learning is very much acknowledged by the QCA's guidance. Mathematical understanding, for example, is seen as being developed through stories, songs, games and imaginative play (QCA, 2000: 68) and, again, the practitioner is given many examples of practical activities to help the children on their way to attaining the early learning goals.

Relating the Guidance to Essential Elements Identified by the Early Years Curriculum Group (1998)

Having looked generally at the organisation of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) and the way in which it reflects what we know about teaching for understanding, it would be useful at this stage to return to the essential points identified by the Early Years Curriculum Group as being important to the development of a child's learning and understanding. The essential elements identified were *active learning, interactive learning, decision making, reflecting and representing*. (Early Years Curriculum Group, 1998). These elements were used as a framework by the group to consider the National Curriculum (DES, 1989) in terms of how it reflected research evidence on learning and understanding in the early years. The same framework will be used to analyse the new curriculum guidance, albeit in much less detail.

Active learning is advocated in the curriculum guidance through the many examples of recommended practical activities, e.g.

Provide and encourage children to play with and talk about collections of objects that have similar and different properties, for example natural and made, size, colour, shape, texture, function. (QCA, 2000: 89 from *Knowledge and Understanding of the World*)

Interactive learning is described by the Early Years Curriculum Group as being either interaction with the teacher or with other children. The importance of scaffolding is stressed in child-teacher interaction. The area of *Communication, language and literacy* provides us with examples of scaffolding e.g.

Respond to children and reply in words that extend and model the child's communication. (QCA, 2000: 49).

and also with examples of how to encourage pupil-pupil interaction:

Encourage conversation and help children to respond to the contributions of others in role play and other activities. (QCA, 2000: 49).

Decision making is another requirement identified by the curriculum group from research that is seen as being essential if children are to make sense of their learning. From the area of *Physical development* it is recommended that teachers:

Talk with children about their actions and encourage them to explore different ways of representing ideas and actions as they move. (QCA, 2000: 105).

From *Knowledge and Understanding of the World* teachers are asked to:

Give opportunities to design practical, attractive environments, for example taking care of the flowerbeds or organising equipment outdoors. (QCA, 2000: 97)

Reflecting is about activating prior knowledge and building upon that knowledge. An example from the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* can be found in the area of Mathematical development

Discuss with children how problems relate to others they have met and their different solutions. (QCA, 2000: 77)

Finally, the Early Years Curriculum Group (1998) identified *Representing* as a vital part of learning and understanding. By representing what they have learned in either spoken, physical or graphic form young children's understanding is formulated and reformulated. From the area of *Personal, social and emotional development* we find:

Encourage children to explore and talk about new learning, valuing their ideas and ways of doing things. (QCA, 2000: 33)

From the area of *Creative development* teachers are asked to

Provide children with opportunities to use their skills and explore concepts and ideas through their representations. (QCA, 2000: 121)

Conclusion

Early Learning Goals (QCA, 1999) replaced the earlier *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning* (SCAA, 1996) as a document that sets out what children should attain before embarking on the National Curriculum. Unlike its predecessor, however, the new document has the support of curriculum guidance that aims to help young children meet the learning goals in ways that match what research evidence has told us about children's learning and understanding. Children need to develop understanding in order to make connections with what they already know, to solve problems, to be creative, to reason, to make sense of what they are learning and, because of this, remember what they have learned and apply that learning in new contexts. The earlier document (SCAA, 1996), containing as it did only the final targets, could quite easily have led to practitioners delivering a totally inappropriate curriculum. This has been remedied by the publication of *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000). Concern had been expressed (see Introduction) about the inappropriateness of what was being seen as the National Curriculum simply being diluted for pre-school children as they were rushed towards targets and baseline assessment. The new curriculum guidance should help to remedy this. Certainly, the curriculum addresses the needs and opportunities identified by the Early Years Curriculum Group as being essential for understanding and effective learning. Early years practitioners have been given permission, if they needed it, to plan a curriculum on what is known about developing children's understanding and learning. As a bonus, the whole of the Reception Year is included in the foundation stage and these children also now have a curriculum more suited to meeting their needs.

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